

MHW
Part 42

THE

SHORTNESS AND UNCERTAINTY

OF

HUMAN LIFE:

A SERMON.

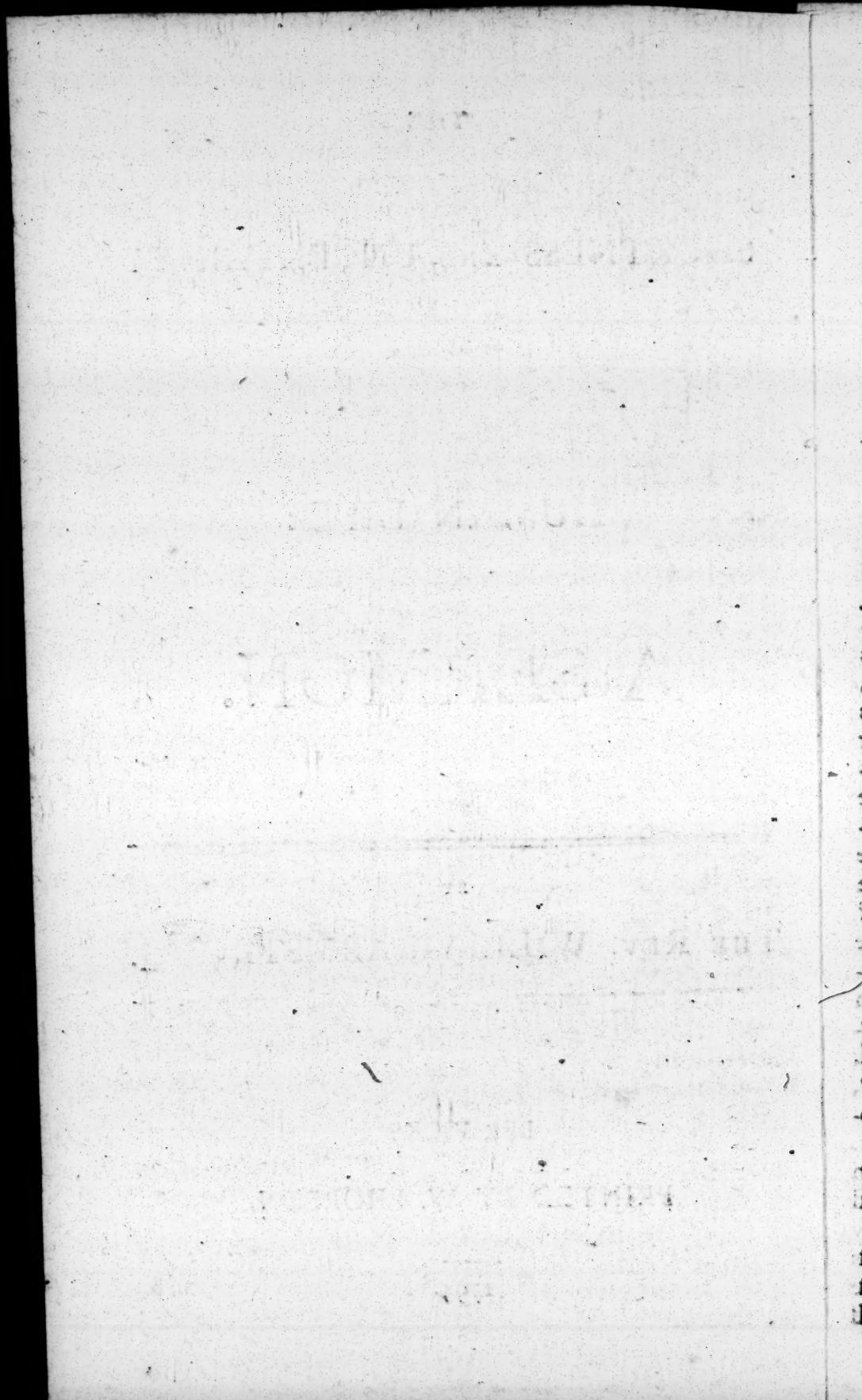
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THE
Shortness and Uncertainty of Human Life.

Hebrews xiii. verse 14.

Here we have no continuing city; but we seek one to come.

The life of man in this world is often compared in Scripture, to the life of a traveller, of a stranger, and sojourner here below. Heaven, that seat of established happiness above, is our home, and ought as such to be pursued by us. Thither all our steps should be directed; thither in heart and affection we should be continually ascending, while we travel through this world, as the road to a better country above. In our journey we meet with all the inconveniences to which travellers are subject, disagreeable lodging, and ordinary entertainment; and if our accommodations were much better than they commonly are, yet must we leave them, and no more think of taking up with them, than a traveller would of fixing his habitation upon the most beautiful spot of earth he meets with in his way, or in the best accommodated inn upon the road. The little rest we have is short and interrupted, and like that of travellers, must be left perhaps with the next morning's light, and we ourselves called hence to an everlasting and unchangeable state of existence. "Here we have no continuing city, but we seek one to come."

I. These words reminds us of what we are but too apt to forget, viz. the shortness and uncertainty of our abode in this world. And

II. They suggest the course we ought to take in consequence of this, viz. to seek our happiness in that future state, where only pure, uninixed, and eternal joys are to be found.

I. Let us consider the force of these words, Here we have no continuing city. 1st. Experience alone may convince us, that our days are fleeting as the shadow of a cloud that passeth over the earth ; or, as the vapour that ariseth for a moment, and then vanisheth away. 2dly, The thread of our present existence is liable to be cut short by numberless accidents, and numberless diseases. No sooner does this animal frame arrive at a certain pitch, than, like the flower of the field, it hastens to decay. Death may seize us at a moment's warning, and remove us hence, as it has done thousands before us, in all the different stages of life, at a time we look not for him. Or if no sudden call should surprize us, a few years at farthest, will lay us in the dust of the earth, and destroy not only the life we now have, but the very remembrance of it too ; so that in a short time, the place which now knows us, will know us no more again for ever.

2. The things of this world, are no more to be depended on than our power of enjoying them. Riches make themselves wings and fly away. Our best friends, and most valuable acquaintances, often die, and leave us overwhelmed with sorrow for their loss. Fire, storm, or thieves, may strip us of our worldly goods : and pretended friends, or open enemies, may make our ruin the foundation of their own greatness. Nothing is permanent on earth. The revolutions of kingdoms, and the rise and fall of individuals, shew it. Where are the mighty empires of the Greeks, the Medes and Persians? Nothing almost but the names remain. Where are the proud cities of Nineveh and Babylon? Are they not become ruinous heaps ? a dwelling place for dragons, an astonishment and hissing without inhabitant ? Even Jerusalem, so famed of old as the glory of the whole earth, has long since been destroyed from the very foundations, and that land which was once the heritage of God's peculiar people, is now trodden down of the Gentiles. The same instability of human greatness, is observable in the rise and fall of families, and individuals. Look round the neighbourhood in which you have resided for thirty or forty years. What unexpected changes have your eyes beheld in that short space of time ? You have seen the obscure and indigent, exalted to riches and honour ; and

many of those, who once held conspicuous stations in life, depressed with poverty, or buried in the dust. Among the numbers that surround you, how few do you behold of those who were the companions of your youth? And of those few still fewer, whose outward circumstances have not, in some respect or other, suffered some considerable change.

From the shortness and uncertainty of life, and from the instability of all earthly enjoyments, this world must, of course, be a scene of trial and trouble. And such indeed it is found to be. We enter upon life, perhaps big with the expectation of nothing but the enjoyment of uninterrupted good; and we find ourselves soon surrounded with a crowd of evils. We go on still hoping to find something satisfactory, and are still disappointed: unhappy by missing the object of our wishes, or wretched by obtaining it. We either find not what we sought; or we find what appeared to be happiness, to be emptiness, if not bitterness itself. We bend under our own afflictions, and a feeling heart often lays upon us the additional load of other people's. Poverty subjects us to the bitter bondage of incessant toils; or if we arrive at the more elevated stations of life, are we more securely fenced about from evils, or more defended from unhappiness than those below us? Is the sleep of them that possess much, sweeter or less interrupted than that of their inferiors? Or are diseases and death kept longer from *them* than from the poorest? Far otherwise. The outside indeed is dazzling and pompous, but within are cares and fears. Or supposing we could attain all the honours and riches we desire, and what is still less to be expected, that we should feel ourselves happy in the possession of them, yet alas! how little would it avail us? The time of enjoyment at farthest is short. We have no continuing city here. The *last enemy must* come, and to his force the best built fabric of human happiness must yield.

Such is the uncertain and unhappy condition of man in this world, from the highest to the lowest without exception. What therefore must we do? Shall we lie down in despair of help? Or shall we spend our time in fruitless complaints of our unhappy portion, and refuse

to seek for happiness, because we cannot find it in this earthly vale? Shall we not rather in the

II. Place attend to the suggestion in the text, and since we have no continuing city here, learn with the Apostle to seek one to come, in those regions of eternal delight, where the miseries of our present state will no longer affect us; nay, where the very remembrance of them will be effaced by joys unspeakable, and full of glory. That nothing but our own fault can deprive us of this blessedness, is a truth we all, as Christians, profess to believe. God has prepared it as the reward of virtue from the foundation of the world. Christ has revealed it in the gospel as the purchase of his merits, which he invites and intreats us to accept at his hands. Our belief of it is confirmed by a series of well attested miracles, and particularly by the resurrection of our Lord from the dead, and his ascension to heaven; than which nothing can be a plainer proof that he was sent from God to teach us the road to true happiness in a continuing city to come. Indeed one chief design of Christ's appearance on earth was, to bring this future life and immortality to light; and accordingly we see it expressly and repeatedly inculcated throughout the gospel. The hour is coming, as our blessed Lord informs us, when all that are in the graves shall hear the voice of the Son of Man, and shall come forth; they that have done good, to the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, to the resurrection of damnation. When the penitent malefactor applied to him for mercy, he answered him in these gracious words, Verily, to-day shalt thou be with me in Paradise: i. e. in a state of happiness. And when he was about to leave this world, he told his sorrowing disciples, as the amplest consolation he could impart, *That in his Father's house were many mansions; that he went to prepare a place for them, and that he would come again and receive them to himself, that where he was, there they might be also.* The Apostles also, who were guided by the infallible spirit of God, do both in their lives and writings, exhibit the same glorious hopes of that eternal rest, which remaineth for the people of God. They tell us that the light afflictions of the present state, are not worthy to be compared with that eternal weight of glory that shall be revealed: that a crown of righteousness

is reserved for all that love the appearance of our Lord Jesus Christ: that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens: that by the resurrection of Christ from the dead, we are begotten again to a lively hope of an inheritance incorruptible, undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for us. Nay, St. John, to aid our weak conceptions, has gone so far as to present us with a grand and affecting view of that holy city, the new Jerusalem, which is to be the perpetual residence of the Saints made perfect. And though the description contains an assemblage of the most beautiful and magnificent ideas, and be as particular as our present faculties can admit, yet does it fall far short of the glorious original. For as another Apostle informs us, eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither hath it entered into the heart of man to conceive the things which God hath there prepared for them that love him. However putting all this together, it is plain to every one that believes the Gospel, that though we have no continuing city here, yet it will be our own fault if we have not one in a better world; and that however misery and disappointment may be our portion on earth, yet in heaven we shall enjoy happiness unmixed and eternal.

Now if such complete felicity close the short scene of this probationary state; if God and angels stand ready to receive us at the end of our earthly pilgrimage, and to welcome us into the joy of our Lord; and if all that an everlasting heaven can impart be the final reward of our faith and obedience; then how unworthy shall we be of that blessedness, if instead of seeking it with a degree of earnestness suitable to its worth and excellency, we confine our affections and pursuits to the sordid and perishable enjoyments of this lower world, and refuse to do the work which God hath appointed us. Let us not deceive our own souls in a matter of such importance! The blessedness we have been speaking of belongs to them only, who by patient continuance in well doing, seek for glory, honour, and immortality. Lazy wishes, and partial performances, will not secure it. Our most active endeavours must be exerted. We must with the Apostle seek, before we can reasonably hope to obtain that king-

dom, which cannot be moved. And how did he seek it? Was it not by a life devoted to the service of God, and the good of his fellow creatures? by voluntarily exposing himself to reproach and persecution in the way of his duty? and by sacrificing every comfort, convenience, and advantage in this world, and even life itself to the hope of greater blessings in a better world to come? And if Heaven's choicest favourites thus entered into glory through much tribulation, can we expect to arrive there on easier terms. If therefore we would successfully seek a continuing city to come, it must be in the way that holy men of old have done it before us; even by such a faith in Christ, as produces obedience to the precepts of the gospel; and by continually exercising ourselves to have a conscience void of offence both towards God and towards man. More particularly, we must make the Almighty the chief object of our fear and love. We must worship and serve him truly all the days of our life. We must pray to him in all our wants, submit to him in all our sufferings, and praise him for all the comforts and conveniences he affords us *here*, and for the hopes he hath given us in Christ, of glory and immortality hereafter. So far from being conformed to the world, we must do what we can to check the growing immoralities of the age in which we live. We must weekly instruct the ignorant, boldly rebuke vice, and patiently suffer for the truth's sake. Every worldly advantage that comes in competition with a good conscience must be renounced. Every desire of forbidden pleasures must be mortified. We must be temperate and chaste, humble and lowly in our own eyes, meek and merciful, true and just in all our dealings with mankind; and ready to forgive the trespasses of our brethren against us, as we expect forgiveness of our own offences at the hand of God. We must walk in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless; and, in particular, we must remember to profess our faith in him in that peculiar way which he himself hath appointed, viz: by reverently and thankfully eating and drinking at his table; and above all, we must cultivate that spirit of universal love, which shone so conspicuously in Him, and without which we in vain pretend to the character of Christ's disciples.

If we thus seek a continuing city to come, we have every assurance from the word of God, that we shall not seek it in vain.

All that remains now is to apply what has been said in a few practical inferences. And

1. If our abode on earth is so short and uncertain, and all worldly possessions and enjoyments so empty and unstable, then why should we *spend our money for that which is not bread, and our labour for that which satisfieth not?* Why should we live and act as if our days on earth would never end, and so greedily aspire after that, which oftener proves a curse than a blessing to its possessors? What folly to seek our happiness where reason, experience, and the word of God assures us it is not to be found? And what still greater folly to pursue the riches of this world, as too many do, by unjust and oppressive methods? For this is, in effect, to give our souls in exchange for the world, and to prefer the empty husks which earth affords, to the solid and permanent delights of heaven. Our happiness consists not in the abundance we possess; or if it did, and we could even enjoy (as it is falsely called) all the goods of this world, yet we know, that in the midst of life we are in death. Pain, affliction, and adversity, in all their various forms of misery, are our portion here. In these circumstances of distress, what more natural than to wish for a more settled state of happiness? And if we wish for it, we should weigh the arguments that prove it, and yield to the force of the evidence they carry with them. And if after this we are convinced that there really is such a future state of happiness, we cannot be so insensible to our own good, as not to desire a share in it; and if we really desire it, we will be careful to seek it in the way that God hath appointed, viz. by the uniform practice of all that is good, and virtuous, and praise-worthy.

2. The assurance which the gospel gives us of future blessedness in a continuing city to come, will (if we improve it as we ought) be a never-failing cordial of delight in this our earthly pilgrimage. It is calculated to convey support and consolation to the lowest and most unhappy of the sons of Adam, if they are but so wise as to lay hold of it. Let us but live up to our Christian profes-

Son, and then we know that the greatest evils that befall us, can last no longer than this short life. What puts an end to our existence here, puts an end to our miseries too, and at the same time introduces us to happiness unutterable and inconceivable. Trust therefore in the Lord, and be doing good; and then may you be assured, that though you are poor in this world, yet shall you have durable and abundant riches in the next. Though loaden with affliction, and sunk in distress, yet shortly will Christ wipe away all tears from your eyes, and soon will you arrive at those blest abodes, where sin and sorrow shall be no more known for ever. Though you have not here, (it may be) like your blessed Master, even where to lay your head, yet in heaven are mansions of glory to receive you. Though the wicked and profane now treat you with contempt, yet a few years will make a wide alteration in your favour. Angels and the spirits of just men made perfect will become your familiar companions and friends, and Christ himself will not disdain to own you as a beloved brother. In short, be your situation in this life ever so deplorable, the day is at hand that will set all right; when you shall lift up your heads with joy, and bless God even for those severe dispensations in this world, that have led to such consummate happiness in the next.

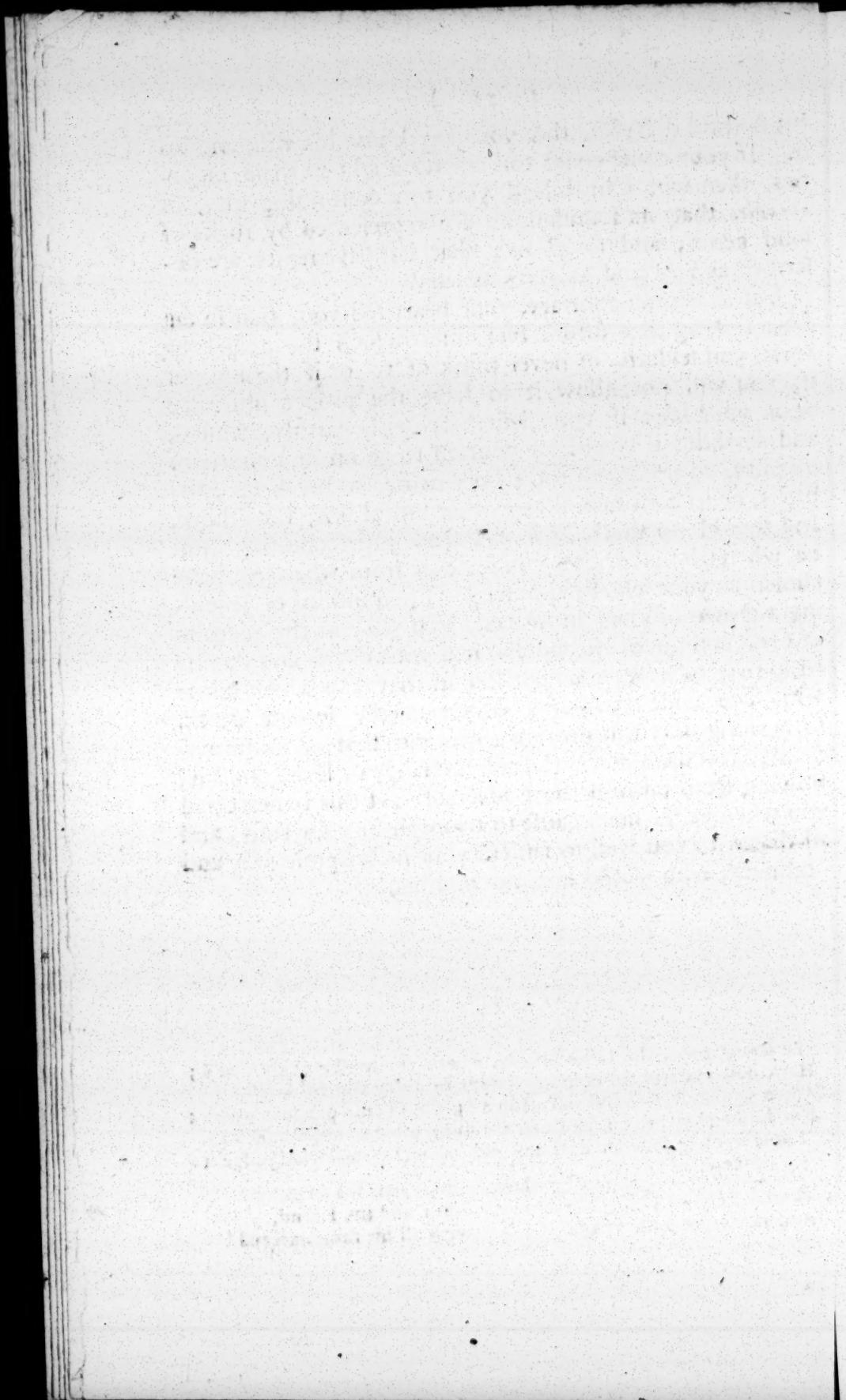
Lastly, Since the promise of future blessedness is made to those only, who seek it in the way that God prescribes, it becomes a question of importance, and what each of us should put to his own conscience, Am I seeking a continuing city to come? Does your life and conversation shew it? Do you watch and pray against the sins that most easily beset you? Do you endeavour, while in the world, to live above the world? Does your belief of those joys, that are at God's right hand for evermore, render you superior to all that earth can promise, and to all it can threaten, while you are passing thither? Are you afraid to offend God? Do you make conscience of observing all his commands? Do you endeavour to please him by a life of piety? Do you study to glorify him by a strict regard to your moral conduct? In short, are you following Christ, not like the thoughtless multitudes in the days of his flesh, from low, selfish motives; but like

his faithful disciples, that you may know his will, and do it. If your consciences can answer aright to these inquiries, then will Christ lead you to a continuing city, so durable, that its foundations are represented by rocks of solid gems; and so glorious, that its pavements are described as gold, and its gates as pearl.

But if, on the contrary, your heart tell you, that so far from seeking that future blessedness which the gospel reveals, you seldom, or never think of it: or if thinking of it, you will not allow it to have the proper influence upon your life: if your desires are only earthly, sensual, and devilish: if you allow yourself to go on in a course of iniquity, to profane God's holy name, to break his Sabbaths, or to continue in any other wilful sins, then think, and tremble to think, how wretched your condition must be, when death separates you for ever from what you have chosen as your chief happiness. Then instead of receiving a crown of glory in heaven, you will, as the enemies of God and goodness, be doomed with devils and damned spirits, to have your portion in that lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death. One thing only can prevent this, and that is, an immediate repentance, and a thorough change of heart and life, flowing from faith in the Redeemer. If this is neglected you will give the devil cause to triumph in your ruin; and all that wish you well to lament your incorrigible folly and obstinacy, who would take no warning,

HYMN.

1. Ye living men, the tomb survey, where you must quickly dwell;
Hark how the awful summons sounds in ev'ry fun'ral knell!
2. Once you must die, and once for all; the solemn purport weigh;
For know that heav'n and hell are hung on that important day.
3. Those eyes so long in darkness veil'd, must wake the judge to see.
And ev'ry word, and ev'ry thought must pass his scrutiny.
4. O may I in the judge behold my Saviour and my friend,
And far beyond the reach of death with all his saints ascend!



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